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ABSTRACT

Early childhood education specialists in the United States can learn from the Reggio Emilia experience. This document details five aspects of Reggio Emilia practices in the following sections: (1) "The Contribution of Graphic Languages to Young Children's Project Work," discussing how children are encouraged to use graphic languages and other media, including various visual media, to represent memories, predictions, hypotheses, and ideas; (2) "Children's Awareness of What is Valued by Adults," crediting part of the success of the Reggio Emilia preprimary classes to the children's sense of what is important to the adults in their lives; (3) "The Content of Relationships," emphasizing that relationships need content of mutual concern or interest to provide pretexts and texts for interactions; (4) "The Value of Documentation," asserting the importance of documentation of children's ideas, experiences, and efforts to the program's overall quality; and (5) "The Role of the Leader in the Quality of Education," discussing the complex role of leaders in advancing practices. (BGC)

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# Lessons from Reggio Emilia: An American Perspective

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Early childhood specialists in the United States of America can learn many lessons from the Reggio Emilia experience. In this paper I propose to discuss five of them in particular that have especially enriched and advanced my own thinking about the education of young children.

## 1. The Contribution of Graphic Languages to Young Children's Project Work.

The involvement of young children in extended projects is one of the most impressive features of the Reggio Emilia approach. The inclusion of long term investigation projects is not new to preschool or primary education. It was a main feature of Dewey's Progressive education in the US earlier in this century, and was richly exemplified during the "Plowden Years" in Great Britain during the 1960s and 1970s. However, the work of children in the Reggio Emilia preprimary schools advances the practice of the project method in several ways.

First and foremost is the way children are encouraged to use "graphic languages" and other media to represent their memories, predictions, hypotheses, ideas and observations of the phenomena under investigation in multiple dimensions. Examination of the children's work in Reggio Emilia reveals how a wide variety of visual media are used to explore understandings, to reconstruct previous ones, and to co-construct revisited understandings of the topics investigated.

Certainly most early childhood educators in the US and elsewhere acknowledge that young children can explore and express their feelings and understandings verbally, visually, and through dramatic play. The Reggio Emilia experience

however, demonstrates convincingly that preprimary children can use a wide variety of graphic and visual media to represent and thereby communicate their constructions much more readily, more competently and at a much younger age than we have traditionally assumed. In other words, most of us seriously underestimate preprimary children's graphical representational capabilities and undervalue the quality of intellectual effort and development it can engender.

Second, Reggio Emilia practices add a dimension of greater flexibility in the implementation of long term projects than I have ever seen used before. Reggio teachers and *atelieristi* seem always to be open to the emergence of new ideas, topics, and directions as the investigations proceed. Such flexibility makes it possible for children to exercise initiative and responsibility for the course of their investigations that is denied to them if all the questions, topics and steps to be included in a project are predetermined by the adults without their participation.

Third, the depth and richness of the children's work seems to me to be related--at least it part--to the practice of project work being undertaken by small groups of children rather than a whole class, as more commonly practiced elsewhere. By working in small groups young children are more able to engage in genuine discussion, argument, and in the mutual facilitation of each other's efforts than is possible in larger groups. The benefits of small group work underscores the importance of having at least two teachers responsible for a class.

Another reason why the Reggio Emilia approach to project work is first on my list of lessons is that it is a feature of early childhood education that can be adapted and adopted in any environment, anywhere in the world--even in places where a wide variety of materials is not readily available. Wherever children are growing, they are doing so in environments in which there are phenomena worthy of their close examination, investigation, and representation. By far

the large majority of the world's children today lack access to cameras, or various drawing, painting and construction materials; but they are surrounded by nature and objects of interest, and by adults who are engaged in work and other activities about which the children can argue, express hypotheses, make predictions, discuss, and engage in the kind of research that will strengthen their confidence in their own intellectual powers. Reggio Emilia preprimary schools show us the project approach with young children at its best.

**2. Children's awareness of what is valued by adults**

One hypothesis that seems to me to account, at least in part, for the exceptional quality of the children's work is that the children in Reggio Emilia preprimary classes--like all young children--sense what is important to the adults around them. Like all children, they are aware at some preconscious level of what the important adults in their lives really care about, find interesting, believe is worth doing, worth probing, and what they believe to be worthy of the children's time and serious attention. The children are likely to be aware of what the adults value enough to take great care to explain, to photograph, to make notes about, to transcribe from tape recordings, and what they document and display very carefully. In addition, the adults sometimes repeat back to the children their own words previously recorded or remembered; in this way, children are likely to value their own and each other's ideas and thus give serious thought to the work at hand. Awareness of what adults value should not be confused with what provokes adults' praise and flattery; rather, I have in mind children's awareness of what adults take seriously enough to make suggestions about, to ask for clarification about, to urge children to look at again, to consult books about, to reconsider, and perhaps do over again.

If this hypothesis is valid, then all teachers might ask of themselves questions like: What do the children in my class sense is really important to me? What do they think I care about deeply enough to probe, transcribe, photograph, document and display? Children's answers to these questions (that would have to be asked carefully and most likely indirectly) could provide some insights teachers can use as a basis to modify their responses and organization of the program and the environment. Of course, it could be--in theory at least--that children sense that nothing matters much to the adults in their classroom; however, that seems highly unlikely.

**3. The content of relationships**

The third lesson is based on the assumption that individuals cannot just relate to each other in a vacuum; they have to have something to relate to each other *about*. In other words, relationships have to have content of mutual concern or interest that can provide pretexts and texts for their interactions.

In contrast to what I usually see in preprimary classrooms in the US and some other countries, the content of teacher-child (as well as child-child) interaction is focused on the work in progress rather than mainly on academic tasks, and the routines and rules that govern so much of classroom life in early childhood programs. In R. E. classrooms, children and the adults seem to be equally interested and invested in the progress of the work, the ideas being explored, the techniques and materials to be used, the intentions and meanings of the participating children, and the progress of the projects themselves. In other words, the work undertaken by the children provides rich content for interaction and relationship building. Such rich content for relationship building is less likely to be available if all the children in the group are engaged in making the same

Valentine cards, snowflakes, and pumpkins so often seen in our early childhood programs. In the Reggio Emilia classrooms the children's roles in their relationships with adults are more often as apprentices than as merely the targets of instruction or as objects of flattery and rewards.

**4. The value of documentation**

The fourth lesson and perhaps the most unique contribution of our colleagues in Reggio Emilia to early childhood education is the introduction of documentation as a standard part of classroom practice.

It seems to me that the practice of documenting the children's experiences, ideas, and efforts, contributes to the quality of the program in at least four ways. First, it contributes to the extensiveness and depth of the learning gained by the children from their projects and other work. As Loris Malaguzzi points out, through documentation the children "become even more curious, interested, and confident as they contemplate the meaning of what they have achieved (Malaguzzi, 1963, p. 63)." Experience and observation of the children in Reggio Emilia also indicates that children learn from and are stimulated by each other's work made visible through documentation.

Second--and some might insist that this point be first--the documentation makes it possible for parents to become acutely aware of their children's experience in the school. Again, as Malaguzzi puts it, documentation "introduces parents to a quality of knowing that tangibly changes their expectations. They reexamine their assumptions about their parenting roles and their views about the experience their children are living and take a new and more inquisitive approach toward the whole school experience" (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 64).

Third, documentation is an important kind of teacher research, sharpening and focusing teachers' attention on the

intentions and understandings of the children as well as their own role in children's experiences. It provides a basis for the modification and adjustment of teaching strategies and a source of ideas and the creation of new ones. Documentation also deepens teachers' awareness of each child's progress. On the basis of the rich data made available through documentation, teachers are able to make informed decisions about appropriate ways to support each child's development and learning. Moreover, teachers and *atelieristi* in Reggio Emilia preprimary schools are often observed in intense discussion with each other about the documentaries around them.

Fourth, a contribution of particular relevance to American educators, documentation provides information about children's learning and progress that cannot be demonstrated by the formal standardized tests and checklists commonly employed in the US. While US teachers sometimes gain much important information and insight from their own observations of children, the documentation of the children's work in such a wide variety of media provides compelling public evidence of the intellectual powers of young children that is not available in any other way that I know of. As suggested above, the documentation provides rich bases for teachers to learn together, with and from each other as they examine the documentaries of each others' classes.

The powerful role of documentation in these four ways however, is possible because the children are engaged in interesting projects and other activities worthy of documentation. If, as is common in many US classrooms, the children spent large proportions of time making the same pictures with the same materials about the same topic on the same day in the same way, it is unlikely that documented displays would intrigue parents and provide rich content for teacher-parent or child-parent discussion!

**5. The role of the leader in the quality of education**

As we take this special opportunity to remember our friend Loris Malaguzzi, and to acknowledge his extraordinary contribution to all of us, a fifth lesson--not easy to learn--is the importance of the complex role of leaders in advancing our practices. The nature of leadership has been studied throughout most of this century. While a variety of theories and paradigms have been put forward to account for exceptional leaders, all agree that they are individuals with combinations of special characteristics. Although for many like myself, Malaguzzi's role and leadership style can only be perceived from a geographical and cultural distance, there is no doubt that his great contribution rests on many of his personal qualities. Among them was the ability to see ahead of many and to articulate with deep conviction a vision of what could be, of possibilities, and to work toward that vision with dedication, commitment, and energy. He showed willingness to engage in a long struggle to realize the goals and values he articulated. He protected and promoted a view of what is best for young children and their families. He not only inspired his co-workers, but continues to inspire us to take up his cause, and to provide leadership in our own communities with as much knowledge and understanding as we can, and to continue to strive, even in the face of various obstacles--as did he. Our colleagues in Reggio Emilia have been working hard for a generation. They have laid the groundwork for us, and we are grateful for the inspiration they continue to give us.

We know from the experience of this century, that really good ideas and practices emerge, spread, and flourish, only to subside under pressure from a variety of adversaries. If we fail to accept the leadership responsibilities left to us by Loris Malaguzzi to continue to improve children's lives--in school and out of school--at some point in the future we will look back on this moment in time with deep nostalgia.